

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON - U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Chair Michael K. Young, Vice Chair Felice D. Gaer, and Commissioner Preeta Bansal will travel to Kabul, Afghanistan, August 8-13, for discussions with senior officials in the government of President Karzai, members of the Constitutional, Human Rights, and Judicial Commissions, representatives of NGOs, religious and human rights organizations, and the diplomatic community.

Afghanistan is in the midst of an historic transition. The United States and other donors must continue to play a critical role in that country's transformation. Respect and protection of human rights, including freedom of religion, is essential for the successful reconstruction of Afghanistan. An Afghanistan that respects the human rights of all, including ethnic and religious minorities and women, will be a more stable, responsible member of the international community - and less likely to become a terrorist haven.

"President Bush has made strong public statements affirming the U.S. commitment to freedom in Afghanistan. The Commission is, however, seriously concerned about U.S. policies in Afghanistan and their impact on its future. There are troubling indications that Afghanistan is being reconstructed, without serious U.S. opposition, as a state in which an extreme interpretation of Sharia would be enforced by a government which the United States supports and with which our nation is closely identified," said USCIRF Chair Michael K. Young.

Commission recommendations for U.S. policy include the following:

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Because Afghans must be protected so that they can exercise their human rights, the U.S. government and other donors should enhance their efforts to enable the Karzai Administration to exercise its authority throughout the country and support expansion of international security presence beyond Kabul. The international community must end their support for warlords operating independently of central authority.

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Human rights must be fully guaranteed in the new constitution, consistent with international human rights standards. The new constitution should guarantee that the religious freedom of all Afghans is protected, that women and members of religious minorities have equal rights, that non-Muslims will not be subject to Sharia, and that punishments such as flogging, amputations, and stoning are banned.

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In order to establish the rule of law, which is essential for the protection of human rights, including religious freedom, the U.S. government and other donors should continue to support efforts by the Transitional Administration, and specifically the Judicial Reform Commission, to re-build the justice system in accordance with international standards.

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The United States and other influential external parties, including the United Nations, should urge the Karzai administration to abolish religious police or similar organizations and exclude the use of accusations of blasphemy or offending Islam to stifle public debate or the freedom of expression.

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The United States and other donors should expand programs to inform Afghans about human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, through exchange programs, broadcasting and print sources, school curricula, and teacher training.

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The United States should appoint a high-ranking official to the American diplomatic mission in Afghanistan to advance human rights, including freedom of religion, particularly in connection

with reconstruction and recovery programs and the establishment of the new constitution, judiciary, and legal system.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

- Dean Michael K. Young ,
- Felice D. Gaer ,